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ABSTRACT

The ability of every student to successfully complete high school is fundamental to continued success and quality of life. As such, Alberta Learning's 2000-2003 Business Plan has set a target for improving high school completion by 19-year-old students from 70% to 75%. A key step to achieving this target has involved completing a study of barriers to high school completion, including gathering the input of 22 focus groups held across the province and identifying critical outcomes. Many of these outcomes have been suggested with the intent that they be included in Alberta Learning's three-year planning process and/or in the three-year plans developed by schools and institutions. This report highlights suggested outcomes, including: enhancing early childhood development supports; listening to and supporting students; managing student alienation; increasing opportunities for success among Aboriginal students; increasing students' knowledge of self and effects of labeling; increasing program flexibility; enhancing cooperative education opportunities; tracking students; and building on best practices. Four appendixes include potential attitude assessment instruments; focus group details; focus group coding framework, and resource panel participants. (Contains 29 references.) (GCP)

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SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT AND REPORTING

# REMOVING BARRIERS TO HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION- FINAL REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2001

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**This document is intended primarily for:**
System and school administrators
Teachers and support staff
School board trustees
Post-secondary institutions academic upgrading staff and administration
At risk students
Alberta Learning managers

**And may be of interest to:**
Individuals interested in school improvement and improving high school completion rates

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alberta Learning is committed to ensuring Albertans have the knowledge and skills they need to be successful and to learn quickly and flexibly throughout their lives. This process begins at an early age and reaches a key milestone when students complete high school and begin their adult lives by moving on to further education or employment. As such, the ability of every student to successfully complete high school is fundamental to continued success and quality of life.

The Barriers to High School Completion Coordinating Committee views the descriptor "dropout" as a negative term (Gilbert, et. al., 1993) that supports the view of the potential "dropout" as victim. As the literature review demonstrates, the causes of early school leaving are so complex and multi-faceted that a new, more comprehensive and holistic view of early school leaving is needed for the strategic plan to minimize barriers to high school completion.

An early school leaver is defined as any student who terminates his or her schooling prior to completing a recognized high school program or who does not directly continue their formal education in a post-secondary environment. This definition means completers include students who attain a high school diploma, a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED), or an Integrated Occupational Program Certificate. It includes "non-credentialed completers" and "matriculants." Non-credentialed completers begin a post-secondary program directly from high school without a diploma, but are accepted on the basis of their high school transcript. Matriculants are those who have a comparable academic program to those receiving an Alberta High School diploma, but without some of the formal diploma qualifications that do not apply to post-secondary entrance (i.e. CALM 20; Phys. Ed. 10).

Alberta Learning's 2000-2003 Business Plan has set a target for improving high school completion by 19 year old students from 70% to 75%. A key step to achieving this target has involved completing a study of barriers to high school completion, including gathering the input of 22 focus groups held across the province and identifying the critical outcomes highlighted below. Although this input was broadly based, these outcomes require further discussion with stakeholders to gauge the level of support for them and to consider optional strategies and implementation options.

Many of these outcomes have been suggested with the intent that they be included in Alberta Learning's three-year planning process and/or in the three-year plans developed by schools and institutions.

**Highlights of suggested outcomes:**

- **Enhancing early childhood development supports:** There is a growing appreciation that the early environment children grow up in powerfully shapes their future opportunities for success in school. Three specific outcomes to enhance early supports include:
    - Community agencies with mandates that include family supports work closely with school jurisdictions to promote and facilitate positive parenting that provides stimulating and nurturing home environments.
    - The education planning and reporting process leads to optimum community supports through partnerships with other government agencies and community supports.
    - There is a better understanding of the learning achievements needed by grade one students to promote success, and programs are adjusted to better develop these skills in pre-school children.

- **Listening to and supporting students:** Students at risk of leaving school early tend to be the most disenfranchised students in schools while coping with complex problems in their lives. Suggested outcomes include:
    - Through greater involvement in school-based decision-making, students have an increased sense of belonging and commitment to school life.
    - There are greater opportunities to support students in overcoming barriers to success through extra-curricular activities, mentoring programs, and recognition of students' successes.
    - School programs and curriculum provide greater and more consistent opportunities for students to identify issues and develop skills in managing peer conflict, anger management, family conflict, parenting skills, health, human sexuality, and drug abuse awareness.

- **Managing student alienation:** In support of initiatives like *Safe and Caring Schools*, routine assessments of students' affective experiences at school are recommended to help schools respond appropriately to identified needs. As a result of these periodic assessments, schools can then include strategies in their planning processes for building a more safe and caring school culture. Suggested outcomes include:
    - All students feel cared for and safe.
    - School staff and community actively promote a safe and caring school culture for students.

- **Increasing opportunities for success among Aboriginal students:** Although many of the suggested outcomes are designed to benefit all students, this report needs to be considered in relationship to the *First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework Report* and *Strengthening Relationships, the Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy Framework* to identify additional outcomes for increasing completion rates of Aboriginal students.

- **Increasing students' knowledge of self and the effects of labeling:** Adult students who had left school but returned to formal education later in life spoke about not knowing or understanding their levels of achievement or why they had struggled with their schooling. Others spoke of how labeling had damaged their self-confidence and ability to do well in school. Recommended outcomes for addressing these issues include:
    - Students and their parents have clear knowledge and understanding of the student's curricular achievement, ideal learning styles, and the student's affective experience of school.
    - New approaches to special education are in place that de-emphasize labels and emphasize diagnosis, counseling and program solutions to students' learning challenges.
    - Teachers have the necessary understandings of diagnostic results, teamwork skills, and cross-cultural sensitivities to meet the learning needs of at-risk students.
    - Teachers are provided with opportunities to improve their knowledge and understanding of their students' levels of achievement and learning styles, and incorporate these in their teaching methods and teamwork strategies.

- **Increasing program flexibility:** Rather than making the student fit the high school, one participant commented it's time to "make high school fit the student." Outcomes for increased flexibility include:
    - More Albertans have greater access to successfully complete high school courses.
    - Through greater choice, students have more relevant program options that better meet their needs.
    - Through a more seamless education system, adult students complete programs and receive a departmentally issued credential.

- **Enhancing cooperative education opportunities:** The perception that basic education favors academically-oriented students, received considerable validation in this study.
  Eighty-two per cent of the focus groups raised the concept of cooperative education and the need to make schooling more relevant for trades-oriented students by improving linkages between school and work. Suggested outcomes include:
  - Grade 9 curriculum includes an orientation towards the trades and other occupations.
  - Students' school and work life are more closely linked.
  - Integrated Occupational Program students complete a high school diploma with greater opportunities to pursue career interests.

- **Tracking students:** Along with increasing program flexibility, an improved tracking system between secondary and post-secondary education will provide the ability to confirm what program supports are working and where resources might be better allocated over time. This tracking system is being implemented through a single student identifier.

- **Best Practices:** Program spending that helps students complete high school may potentially reduce future demands on social support programs. Program spending should support, enhance and strengthen successful stay-in-school strategies and initiatives by building on best practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Completion of high school is an important objective for the individual and for society. This report outlines outcomes to achieve the target in Alberta Learning's Business Plan of improving the high school completion rate within 6 years of entering grade 9 from 70% to 75%.

The Barriers to High School Completion Project involved the following steps:

1. conducting a literature search on the causes and preventions of early school leaving;
2. analyzing and summarizing Alberta data and findings on school completion and early school leaving;
3. consulting with an advisory group of Albertans through 22 focus groups conducted throughout the province on the causes and solutions to early school leaving;
4. consulting with a panel of resource people with extensive experience and/or research background in barriers to high school completion;
5. writing a final report defining a strategic plan for the Ministry for improving on-time and longer-term high school completion rates.

The project was facilitated by a Coordinating Committee composed of Alberta Learning personnel and staff from the Departments of Justice, Children's Services, Human Resources and Employment and Community Development. The members of this committee included:

<u>Alberta Learning</u>

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| Christine Drysdale | System Improvement and Reporting |
| Darlene Hayes | Zone 5 Services, Basic Learning |
| Dennis Theobald | System Improvement and Reporting |
| Ed Kozakewich | Learning Support and Accountability, Adult Learning |
| Gary Weber | Library Services, Information and Strategic Services |
| Gerard Bissonnette | French Language Services, Basic Learning |
| Guy Germain | Educational Information Services, Information and Strategic Services |
| John Blevins | Governance and Program Delivery, Basic Learning |
| John Burger, Chair | System Improvement and Reporting |
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| Andrew Curran | Community Development Officer, Volunteer Services Branch |

The review of the Report, subsequent follow-up work and the development of an implementation plan was facilitated by a committee composed of Alberta Learning staff. The members of this committee included:

| | |
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| Amelia Turnbull | National and International Education, Information and Strategic Services |
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## LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF ALBERTA DATA - CONCEPTS OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

A number of researchers (Dorn, 1996; Levin, 1992; Tanner, Krahn and Hartnagel, 1995) suggest that because dropping out is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes existing in several different domains, early school leaver prevention programs must be holistic and broadly based.

This approach is made even more imperative by the recent (AECD, 1993; Gilbert, 1993) recognition that early school leaving is a process – not an event – typically a long process of gradual disengagement (Tanner, Krahn and Hartnagel, 1995; Alexander, et. al., 1997; Mirochnik and McCaul, 1990).

A successful strategic plan will need to be based on theories of what supports students require and that counteract the multiple causes of early school leaving ( U.S. Dept. of Education, 1994). McPartland (1993) shows that historically, activities designed to prevent early school leaving are not up to the task, because the interventions are not basic or intense enough to counteract the multiple primary causes of early school leaving. Much broader reforms are needed that change the strategies from controlling and sorting students to a new emphasis on holistic support structures and processes, involving business, the community, parents, educators, and students (Radwanski, 1987).

Levin (1992) observes that "In Canada, there has been considerable attention paid to the issue of high school dropout rates. Measures taken have primarily tried to prevent dropouts by providing alternative programs, or more counseling and supports. Most efforts replicate existing school structures and processes."

An alternative solution, Levin (1992) suggests, would require systemic change based on the concept of "second chance." Many of these solutions are drawn from adult education and involve more flexible approaches to organization, instruction and credentialing. The barriers to such changes are significant and require rethinking of longstanding ideas about what education is and how it should be delivered.

It seems clear that efforts to counteract negative and defensive world-views held by students at risk of leaving school should be refocused. The implication of this research raises questions of how society can best support the individual learner. Such supports, in addition to being more holistic than past strategies, will need to be constructed in ways that help students achieve success within an environment that is relevant, practical and more controlled by the students themselves.

## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Student-centered, school-related and community/environmental factors associated with early school leaving are not separate, but rather can coexist and interact in myriad ways causing early school leaving. In addition, these factors are often influenced by broader socio-economic realities that influence students, families and school systems (Franklin and Streeter, 1995).

Early school leavers often describe their personal and social lives as being very difficult before they left school, and often express these difficulties and a dislike for school as reasons for leaving. Many often feel that adults in their lives did not help them to stay in school (Britt, 1995).

Ironically, despite the negative feelings early school leavers frequently attribute to their schools, many early school leavers remain committed to the value of education and intend on returning to school one day if the required supports are available. Furthermore, students who have left school often come to see the education system as the future solution to their employability needs; however, early school leavers are quick to criticize the restrictive, authoritarian, juvenile environment within typical high-schools (Tanner, Krahn and Hartnagel, 1995).

Students often view their decision to leave school as rational in terms of their perceptions of the relative payoffs and personal costs of educational attainment. Successful support strategies must recognize this apparent rationality and offer equal or more rational/compelling alternatives.

It is important to emphasize that early school leaving is a process – not an event – typically a long process of gradual disengagement. The factors that are associated with early school leaving have been heavily researched and compiled in a number of references (Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, 1994; Alexander, et.al., 1997; Barington and Hendricks, 1989; Britt, 1995; Franklin and Streeter, 1995; Gilbert, et.al., 1993; Karp, 1988; Radwanski, 1987; Romanik and Blazer, 1990; Welch, 1998). These factors typically include the following:

**STUDENT-RELATED FACTORS:**

Student's perceptions of irrelevance of education to their future
Physical and sensory disorders
Developmental and learning disorders
Temperament and behavioral disorders
Alienation – with overall impact that the student does not feel cared for or cared about
- -Powerlessness – lack of control over immediate environment or future
- -Self estrangement – lack of self-esteem
- -Isolation – lack of sociability
- -Meaninglessness – lack of control over long-term environment or future
- -Normlessness – belief that socially unacceptable behavior is ok, i.e. misbehavior

**STUDENT-RELATED FACTORS (CON'T):**

Social immaturity
Lack of occupational aspirations
Low level of extracurricular participation
Negative peer influences
Minority ethnic background – English as a second language needs
Non-involvement in labour force
Male gender
Early pregnancy
Low ability level
History of low achievement

**SCHOOL-RELATED FACTORS:**

Negative teacher-student dynamics
Inadequate teacher education-inservice
Student feelings of being at-risk i.e. unsafe or victim of ridicule
High teacher turnover
Teaching methods poorly matched to learning styles – frustrated learner
Teachers hold low expectations for student
Lack of program/school choice or student awareness of same

**SCHOOL – COMMUNITY – STUDENT FACTORS:**

Long bus rides
Scare tactics (forecasting lifetime of "bad" jobs for early leavers may backfire)
Family and welfare issues
Weak family supports, family dysfunction, and social isolation
Family income below recognized poverty level
Low parental education level(s)
Transient – move frequently
Over work – i.e. greater than 15-20 part-time employment hours per week.
Favorable labour force opportunities

Although identifying factors associated with early school leaving can assist in understanding the processes linked to leaving school, a potential drawback of such lists is they can lead to a cookbook or checklist approach to problem solving. Such approaches can easily lead to fragmented programs that have little chance of providing the kind of integrated, holistic strategies that are necessary to provide effective solutions. Lists of factors may also suggest causality when a direct causal relationship does not exist.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF ALBERTA EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

An analysis of Alberta students was completed primarily based on data in the student information system. This analysis (excluding Graduate Equivalent Diplomas)[1] included students beginning grade 10 in 1994 or 1995. Factors associated with early school leaving include: male gender, Aboriginal ancestry, and enrollment in special programs including English as a second language, special education, home education or the Integrated Occupational Program. Students associated with French immersion programs had a lower rate of leaving school early.

An analysis was undertaken to test the hypothesis that students completing 14 and 24 stream courses are more likely to leave high school because of the lack of 34 level courses. A total of 4,248 students from an original cohort passed Math 14 and 24, and Science 14 and 24. Of these students, only 35.5% went on to become completers, while 55.8% of the entire cohort were on-time completers. Although there are many other factors that influence the decision to leave school early, there seems to be some initial evidence that designing 34 level courses or providing more opportunities for cooperative education may encourage these students to complete high school.

This analysis also demonstrated that there was no relationship between size of school or whether the school was urban or rural and completion status of students. It was noted that early school leavers, on average, earn 51 high school credits before they leave high school. The complete *Analysis of Characteristics of School Leavers from the Corporate Data Warehouse* is found in the *Barriers to High School Completion – Technical Report*, available from the System Improvement and Reporting Division of Alberta Learning.

[1] In 1993/1994 8.1% of diplomas/certificates awarded were Equivalency Diplomas; in 1994/1995 7.6% of diplomas/certificates awarded were Equivalency Diplomas

## SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

High school completion for a number of students occurs over a period of years well into adulthood. The data presented in the table below speaks to the importance of longitudinal modeling of the processes and solutions to early school leaving. As the 1981 to 1996 census data indicate, there are substantial gains made in the percentage of high school graduates between the ages of 19 and 24 and from 25 to 29, although at a reduced rate in the latter category.

*Percentage of Population (Age 17 – 29) with at Least High School Completion, Alberta and Canada; 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996*

| Age → | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1996:** | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Alberta** | 15.6 | 48.5 | **68.0** | 73.7 | 77.1 | 77.2 | 79.7 | **80.2** | 80.4 | 80.3 | 80.5 | 80.8 | **80.8** |
| **Canada** | 23.0 | 51.3 | **71.6** | 78.3 | 81.1 | 82.0 | 82.5 | **82.4** | 82.7 | 82.3 | 82.3 | 82.2 | **82.1** |
| **1991:** | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Alberta** | 21.0 | 51.8 | **67.3** | 72.5 | 75.3 | 76.4 | 77.0 | **77.1** | 77.5 | 76.0 | 76.4 | 74.7 | **75.5** |
| **Canada** | 25.9 | 53.0 | **70.8** | 76.5 | 78.3 | 79.7 | 79.8 | **79.7** | 79.6 | 79.1 | 78.4 | 77.5 | **77.0** |
| **1986:** | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Alberta** | 19.5 | 47.5 | **63.6** | 68.0 | 69.3 | 70.4 | 69.5 | **70.4** | 70.5 | 71.0 | 72.1 | 72.7 | **73.8** |
| **Canada** | 25.2 | 51.7 | **67.9** | 72.5 | 73.5 | 73.1 | 72.7 | **72.5** | 71.9 | 71.5 | 71.6 | 71.3 | **71.4** |
| **1981:** | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Alberta** | 20.3 | 46.7 | **59.8** | 63.3 | 66.9 | 68.2 | 69.7 | **72.1** | 72.6 | 73.3 | 74.9 | 76.1 | **76.1** |
| **Canada** | 27.0 | 51.3 | **64.7** | 67.7 | 68.9 | 69.1 | 69.6 | **70.1** | 70.5 | 71.5 | 72.4 | 73.3 | **73.2** |

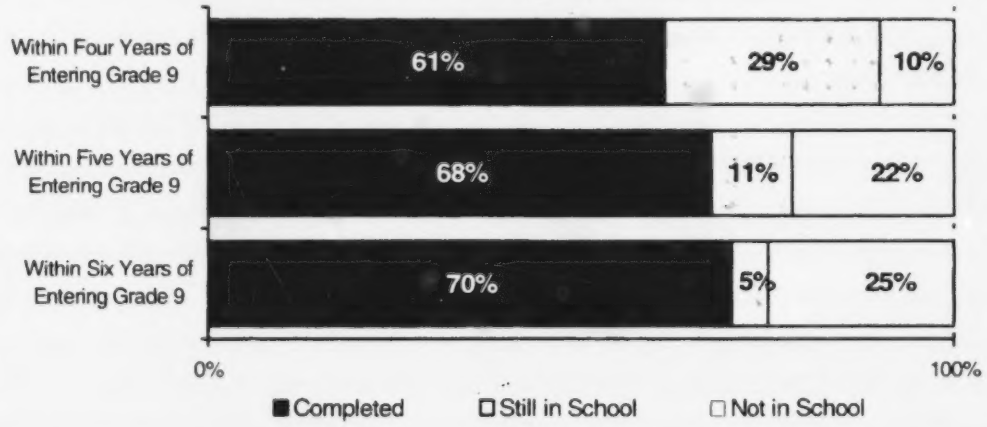
**Source:** Statistics Canada Census Data, 1981 – 1996 (Special Tabulation).

**Notes:** Results are based on samples of approximately 20% of the population. Approximate sample sizes per age: Canada: 105,000; Alberta: 9,100. Approximate margin of error (at .95 confidence level): Canada: ±0.1%; Alberta: ±1.0%.

Diagonally highlighted cells demonstrate completion by age over time in the same cohort.

Alberta high school students 19 years of age or younger also demonstrate a considerable variation in the time required to earn a diploma, as the chart below demonstrates.

*Percentage of Alberta Students Entering Grade 9 in 1993/1994 Who Completed High School within Four, Five and Six Years (by 1997/1998)*




**Source:** Alberta Learning, Performance Measurement and Reporting Branch (based on analysis of Alberta Learning's Student Records System)

**Note:** Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.



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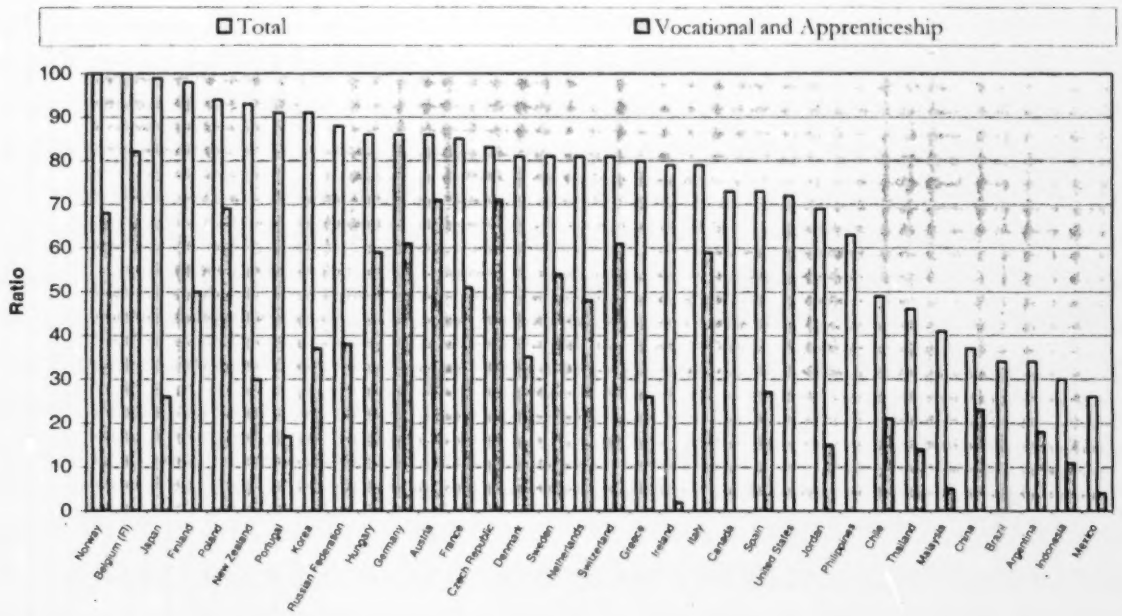
The Aboriginal population has historically experienced higher early school leaving rates compared to the general population. StatsCan data (Galt, 2000) indicate that the percentage of early school leavers in the Aboriginal population remains unacceptably high. In 1996, 45% of Canadian Aboriginal people aged 20-29 had not completed high school.

| | Aboriginal | Non-Aboriginal |
|---|---|---|
| Less than HS | 45% | 17% |
| HS diploma | 32% | 36% |
| College/trade | 20% | 28% |
| University | 4% | 19% |

In the broader, global context, Canadian high school completion compares favorably with completion rates in the United States, but not as well when compared to other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, some of whom achieve completion rates of 100%. Although there is variation in the structure and length of upper secondary programs between countries, the fact that some countries do achieve very high completion rates suggests that increasing the completion target in Alberta over time is not only reasonable but necessary in the face of global competition. By achieving improved high school completion rates, a significant contribution would be made to making Alberta an attractive place to invest because of its world class labour force. The following chart demonstrates Canada's current position compared to the OECD countries.

*Ratio of upper secondary graduates* to population at typical age of graduation, by type of programme - 1996*
*First educational programmes (OECD, 1998)*




**** Upper secondary level of education (ISCED 3)***

Coverage at the upper secondary level corresponds to ISCED 3. This level consists of 2 to 5 years of schooling. Admission into educational programmes at the upper secondary level requires the completion of the lower secondary level of education, or a combination of basic education and vocational experience that demonstrates an ability to handle the subject matter. Upper secondary education may either be terminal (*i.e.* preparing the students for entry directly into working life) or preparatory (*i.e.* preparing students for tertiary education). ISCED stands for the International Standard Classification of Education of 1976.

## SOLUTIONS

While improving high school completion is a complex problem, the following solutions from the literature are presented to stimulate thinking on what a more holistic support model might look like (Bloom, 1991).

**PREVENTION – TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

1. Early intervention strategies to ensure development of strong basic academic skills
2. Alternative schools/programs for basic skill development
3. Instructional technologies, supplemented by tutoring
4. Individualized programs, learning styles, multiple intelligences
5. Conflict resolution/counseling supports
6. Mentoring/tutoring programs
7. Strategies that reinforce caring student-staff relationships
8. Enhanced social supports for remaining in school – creating new primary social support groups
9. Attitude assessments to identify and diagnose at-risk students and/or alienation and early school leaving probability – use of student attitude profiles in some studies have predicted between



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52% - 85% of early school leavers (Romanik and Blazer, 1990; Barrington and Hendricks, 1989). See Appendix A.

**INTERVENTION – TO ENHANCE PERSONAL, SOCIAL/FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONDITIONS**

1. Programs to stimulate and maintain parental interest and involvement in their child(ren)'s education
2. Effective schools (healthy organizational culture)
3. Children's Services Regions and Health Authorities work closely with school boards and prioritize, as part of their mandate, the provision of supports to students at-risk of leaving school early.

**TRANSITION STRATEGIES – TO IMPROVE CAREER PREPARATION, JOB TRAINING AND RELEVANCE OF EDUCATION**

1. Alternative programs/schools: e.g. school board - post-secondary institution partnerships
2. School to work transition strategies
3. School-business partnerships
4. Moderate work hours (less than 15-20) are associated with reduced risk of early school leaving
5. Multiple avenues for students to return – program choice empowers students
6. Recognition of prior learning.

**OTHER RENEWAL STRATEGIES**

1. Teacher Education/Professional development
2. Strike a balance between the social and economic dimensions of staying in school
3. Community linkages
4. Accurate student tracking system.

Reforms are needed that give students greater incentives to stay in school and encourage greater parental school involvement. However, many causes are not school-related and may not have school-based solutions, thus pointing to the need for long-term solutions that provide for more seamless transitions from the basic to the adult learning systems so that programs are available when the student has "healed" sufficiently to access them (Lawton, et.al., 1988).

## FOCUS GROUP CONSULTATIONS

Twenty-two focus groups were conducted throughout Alberta, involving over 210 students, parents, teachers, school and central office administrators and community members. The focus groups were designed to capture specific sub-groups including: members of the Aboriginal community; school jurisdiction staff and clients; students involved with the criminal justice system and their parents; adult learners who had previously left school early and were taking academic upgrading; and staff at post-secondary institutions specializing in academic upgrading. The complete list of focus groups and categories of participants is detailed in Appendix B.

Focus groups were designed to include from 6 to 12 participants in order to provide the opportunity for intensive dialogue around four key questions. The quality of discussion at the focus groups was exceptional, reflecting high levels of interest in the project among focus group participants. The four questions addressed by the focus groups were designed to help define where we are now and where we want to be in relationship to removing barriers to high school completion. The specific questions addressed to the focus groups were:

1. In your experience, is early school leaving a problem?

2. What is being done currently in your community that is helping students complete high school on time (by 19 years of age) or as adults?

3. What further can be done, and by whom, to improve high school completion on time (by 19 years of age) or as adults?

4. Do you have any other comments or suggestions for improving high school completion rates?

Focus group facilitators and observers/note takers were provided from the project coordinating committee. The Ministry of Community Development also cooperated with the project by providing highly trained facilitators in a number of focus group locations. An objective of this approach to focus group administration was to ensure a high degree of involvement and awareness of the focus group input by the project coordinating committee while also ensuring objectivity through the Community Development facilitators.

### Analysis

Notes of the discussions at each focus group were shared with the local focus group coordinator to ensure accuracy. These notes were then coded to define the patterns in the dialogue and the frequencies of these patterns between the focus groups. The coding framework was based on the five general categories of 1) community, 2) funding, 3) program, 4) staff and 5) students. Within these five general categories emerged more specific sub-themes from the analysis of focus group notes. These sub-themes are defined in Appendix C. The complete content analysis of focus group input is available in the Technical Report available from the System Improvement and Reporting Division, Alberta Learning. The analysis of the frequency patterns of the sub-themes between the 22 focus groups is summarized below.

## IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, IS EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING A PROBLEM?

Focus group participants were asked this question as an introductory question to explore their personal experience with the issue of early school leaving. In response to the question, 31 participants in 13 groups most frequently talked about students' emotional or affective relationship to school being characterized by isolation, feelings of low self-esteem or being disconnected from the social fabric of the school. Eight other student-related sub-themes were raised in five to two groups. Dominant among these were the observations that, too often, at-risk students do not have an accurate understanding of their own levels of curricular achievement. Less

frequent observations were made about the lack of career planning and other supports to offset the disadvantages at-risk students face, and the attraction that remunerative work holds for many students, especially when the economy is strong.

**Program Issues**

Program matters across a broad range of sub-themes emerged as a powerful set of observations. A total of 52 comments were raised in 12 groups across the nine program-related sub-themes. Dominant among these issues were observations by nine focus groups about the lack of program flexibility for students and a system of education that does not offer students learning opportunities congruent with their learning styles or needs. There were observations in eight groups about the challenge that transition from junior to senior high presents for students. Grade 9 was described as a critical phase for students where the curriculum is set up for the university-bound route, leaving trades-oriented students with a far less relevant program. Comments were made in five focus groups about an overall lack of program relevance for students, especially if students were not academically oriented. Several participants spoke about the importance of student attitude and basic learning skills development occurring in the early years of life and how there is too little attention being paid to this. Several groups suggested the Career and Technology Studies curriculum, while a good program, is not sufficiently linked to students' career interests or aptitudes. Related to the issue of program flexibility, three groups talked about the lack of flexibility in the times that students may access education programs. In a focus group in Lethbridge, participants said they do not call early school leavers "drop-outs" but instead, "stop-outs" to reinforce the idea that students have the flexibility to return when they are ready.

**Community-Family Issues**

There were 21 comments relating to community-family issues. Many observations were of students struggling with inter-generational patterns of low education success, or low family income levels negatively affecting students' chances for success. A related point was the importance of effective school-home communications and the observation that, all too often, this is lacking for students at-risk of early school leaving.

### Staff Issues

Sixteen staff-related comments were made by five focus groups. The most frequent addressed the observation that schools are not always caring or welcoming places. For example, one participant commented that, "Once students have dropped out, schools tend to not want them back." Another commented that "Schools need to recognize the importance of all individual students." Related to the caring theme were comments that schools can "over-label" students and that staff expectations for students' success or failure have powerful impacts on students. Several participants called for stronger accountability or professional development to ensure teachers are responsive to students' needs.

## WHAT IS BEING DONE CURRENTLY IN YOUR COMMUNITY THAT IS HELPING STUDENTS COMPLETE HIGH SCHOOL ON TIME (BY 19 YEARS OF AGE) OR AS ADULTS?

The intent of this question was to identify current actions or ideas that were seen by focus group participants to be helping improve high school completion rates. As with question one, the focus group input underwent content analysis to isolate substantive comments which were coded according to the general categories and sub-themes listed in Appendix C. Coded input was then organized by frequency and by focus group. This analysis is summarized below.

### Program Issues

Focus group participants most frequently spoke about program-related interventions or supports involving eight sub-themes being provided to help students achieve success in school. Flexible programming was most often cited, whereby greater program choice, individualization or access options were being provided to make school more accessible to students. Related to the flexibility theme, five groups noted the effectiveness of the Outreach programs for students. Several groups talked about the value of industry partnership through cooperative education models, such as the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) or the Green Certificate program, in providing more meaningful programs to at-risk students. Less frequently cited were program adaptations that provided additional affective supports to students, early development of literacy skills, and a grade 9/10 math transition course to improve students' achievement.

### Student Supports

The second most frequent category of interventions was student supports. Assistance with career planning and awareness was the most often cited support, raised in eight focus groups. Other student supports identified included tutoring and teacher-aide assistance. Five groups spoke about affective supports for students, including keeping students focused through athletics, building support networks in schools, emphasizing friendliness, and recognition and reward programs for student successes. Improving students' self-knowledge of their reading levels was stressed by one focus group.

### Staff Interventions

The third most frequently discussed category involved staff interventions. Most commonly cited in seven focus groups were conscious attempts to demonstrate caring relationships with students through teacher advisor programs, emphasizing respect, attendance contracts and other means to demonstrate to students that the staff and adult community cared about the students. Other staff interventions focused on coordinating with community support personnel such as social services, police and health authorities. Identification and diagnosis of at-risk students by staff was noted by three focus groups. Two groups noted how powerful staff expectations of students were in influencing the students' learning, and one group talked about teacher resource groups providing professional development support to teachers in the area of working with at-risk students.

### Community Supports

The fourth category centered on community and involved the sub-theme of mentors discussed by five focus groups. One participant stated:

> the school uses a holistic approach of the circle to give students an opportunity to speak as an individual about the issues and to share good experiences with the group. If there is a crisis, there are resource people who are brought into the school to intervene and assist the student to overcome the obstacles.

The importance of community partnerships was discussed by five focus groups that noted the value of linkages with business, elders, and social services. Other community-based interventions identified by three focus groups included specific work with parents through home visits or liaison staff.

### Funding Issues

A few focus groups spoke about the strategic use of funding to reduce class size for at-risk students or the important uses being made of high needs funding. Student finance grants to adult learners was also cited as providing critical support to adult students.

## WHAT FURTHER CAN BE DONE, AND BY WHOM, TO IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION ON TIME OR AS ADULTS?

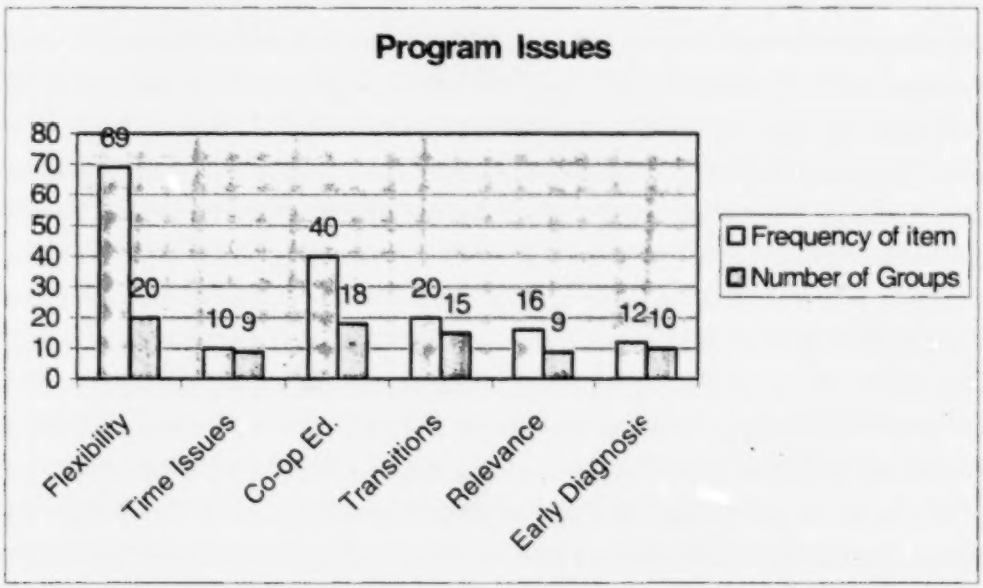
The intent of the third question was to identify where we need to go in removing barriers by talking about new actions or ideas to help improve high school completion rates. As with questions one and two, the focus group input was content analyzed to isolate substantive comments that were coded according to general categories and sub-themes described in Appendix C. Coded input was then organized by frequency and then by focus group. Question three, in conjunction with a final question designed to capture any final comments by focus group participants, generated by far the most input with over 500 observations or comments identified. This analysis is summarized below.

### Program Issues

Program was the dominant category of commentary involving 6 major sub-themes. The most frequent sub-theme raised in 20 focus groups was a call for improved program flexibility for students. Typical among these comments were:

- Schools should recognize students' strengths and interests and work from these points.
- Schools should be more flexible and student-focused.

- Tailor courses to needs/competencies… of the students.
- Need to build on the person's strengths.
- It's time to paint the car a different color, i.e. make high school fit the student, not the student fit the high school.
- Alberta Learning career development (CTS) courses are on the right track, but they must be modifiable.
- All situations are not equal, i.e. some kids need more space, time and support.
- The idea of 'excellence' should be doing your best and meeting your own objectives and your potential.
- Need to be flexible on the entry points for coming back to school because in their lives students may need to leave school for awhile.
- Need to do a better job in ensuring that students with special needs understand how they best can learn – career portfolios.




Program flexibility also extended to time issues. Nine focus groups identified this sub-theme with several noting that some schools start too early for the "growth stage" of teenagers. Start times of 9:00 or 9:30 were recommended. Others called for more flexible timetables or time to complete courses as ways to make programs more flexible for students. Four focus groups called for expanded support for Outreach programs as a model of program flexibility that is working for many students.

Closely related to program flexibility were observations in 18 focus groups regarding the need for improved linkages between program and cooperative education. The traditional high school curriculum was often seen as too focused on university preparation. Consequently, career preparation in the trades was not seen as being sufficiently tailored to students' learning styles, learning strengths or optimal career options. Career and Technology Studies and Registered Apprenticeship Programs were widely supported, but there were compelling calls for extending these efforts through better articulation with technical institutes and with the work place while at the same time linking more fundamentally with the individual student's abilities, interests and needs.

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Program transitions from junior high to high school and from high school to post-secondary study were suggested by 15 focus groups as deserving attention. Grade 9 was described as a crunch point for many students with too few program options being available, especially for the vocationally oriented students. Also, several groups suggested the transitions to post-secondary study should begin to receive attention as early as grade 7 to ease this process. Better links and partnerships between post-secondary institutions and high schools were suggested to address this need.

Program relevance was a sub-theme identified in nine focus groups that spoke of the need to adapt the curriculum to the learning styles of Aboriginal people and the value of ensuring that teaching methods match students interests and learning styles.

The last major sub-theme in the program category, noted by 10 focus groups, was the wisdom of putting an even greater emphasis on the early diagnosis of learning disabilities and the provision of literacy supports as early as possible.

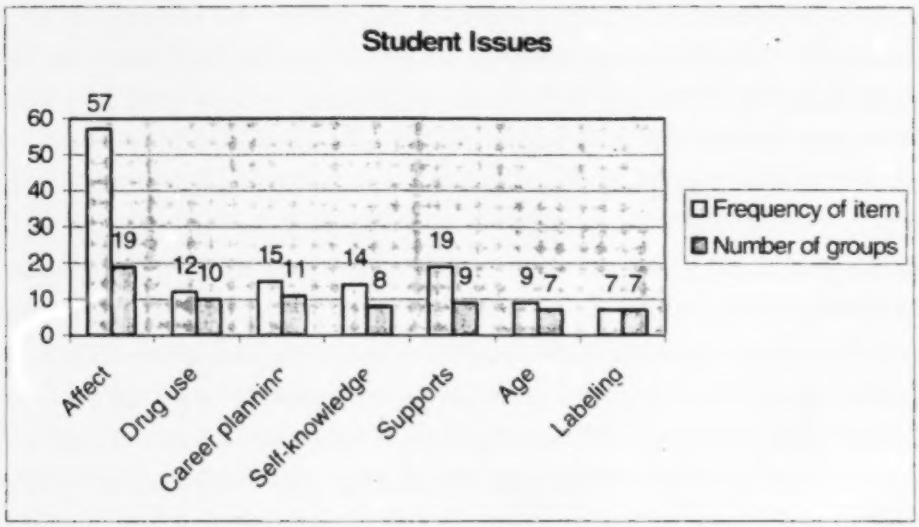
Although identified by only four focus groups, several comments about the Integrated Occupational Program (IOP) warrant specific emphasis given the strength of conviction by the proponents of change to this program. Essentially, the perspective presented is that IOP is too often a "dumping ground" for students with learning disabilities. One participant commented that IOP results in "... students getting lost in the middle – on the one hand they can't go on to post-secondary, yet they can't really go into the trades route." There were also concerns about labeling students with low expectations once placed in IOP. The cooperative education model and diploma programs based on building on students' multiple intelligence were seen as potential alternative approaches to IOP.

Minor sub-themes included the suggestion to make the Career and Life Management (CALM) course available earlier to students and, in doing this, perhaps making it more effective for students; and implementing Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) models into secondary education.

**Student Issues**

The second most frequent category involved student issues. Nineteen focus groups reflecting 57 comments or observations dealt with the sub-theme of students' affective experience of school. One high school student, who had dropped out but returned, stated that "Early school leavers are shadows of learning disabilities." Another participant noted that students drop out incrementally, course by course. More personal approaches to interacting with students were suggested as a way of making schools less alienating to students. Extra-curricular involvement of students was frequently cited as an important way of connecting students to the life of the school. At-risk students were also described as often being involved in power struggles with other students as a means to improve their status and self-esteem. Consequently peer relationships among early school leavers are frequently negative. Instead of providing peer support networks among early school leavers, cliques and group conflict sometimes emerge. A better model of peer relating with more supports for peer relationships was called for.

Other student affect issues included the negative impact long bus rides have on students in rural areas, the need for stress management supports for students, and the need to provide for more student involvement and decision making in their school lives. Student dress was raised as an exclusionary factor among students, but standard dress or school uniforms received variable levels of support. Periodic assessment of student attitudes was sometimes supported by focus groups as one way to monitor and respond to students' affective needs.




Closely related to the sub-theme of student affect was the sub-theme of students' use of illegal drugs or alcohol. Ten focus groups raised this issue, highlighting a relatively common concern that drugs or alcohol seem to be easier to get at an earlier age.

The need for better support to students for career planning was identified in 11 focus groups. Specific suggestions were for elementary teachers to be more "career aware" and that, generally, students need earlier and more intensive career planning supports. Career portfolios were suggested as a potentially useful tool.

Eight focus groups spoke of students not acquiring foundational academic skills because, too often, students are given "social passes" when they had not learned the curriculum for their grade level. Related to this concern was the perceived need for better parent and student self-knowledge of curricular achievement.

When students are experiencing multiple problems such as poverty, family dysfunction, pregnancy, health issues, etc., the need for coordinated and multiple supports was noted by nine focus groups. Specific suggestions were made for increased student involvement in extra-curricular activities, for more Aboriginal counselors, and for integrated support systems based on improved coordination of inter-agency services.

Seven groups talked about the sub-theme of students' age, asking "How do we keep kids who may not be quite finished at 19." The suggestion was made that we need to change the picture of school to a life long approach, providing both more formalized and supported exit and re-entry points in the secondary education system.

Seven groups also discussed the negative impact that labeling has on students. One participant expressed dissatisfaction with counseling and the perception of labeling and streaming for lower achieving students, suggesting that perhaps greater communication is needed instead. An Aboriginal participant stated that psychological assessment tools need to be changed as they are not geared toward Native culture. Another participant stated that high school kids have started to leave 'in their heads' as far back as elementary school because of labeling.

The remaining student sub-themes involved calls for better student tracking systems, by five focus groups, and noted the powerful attraction work has for students especially when the economy is buoyant.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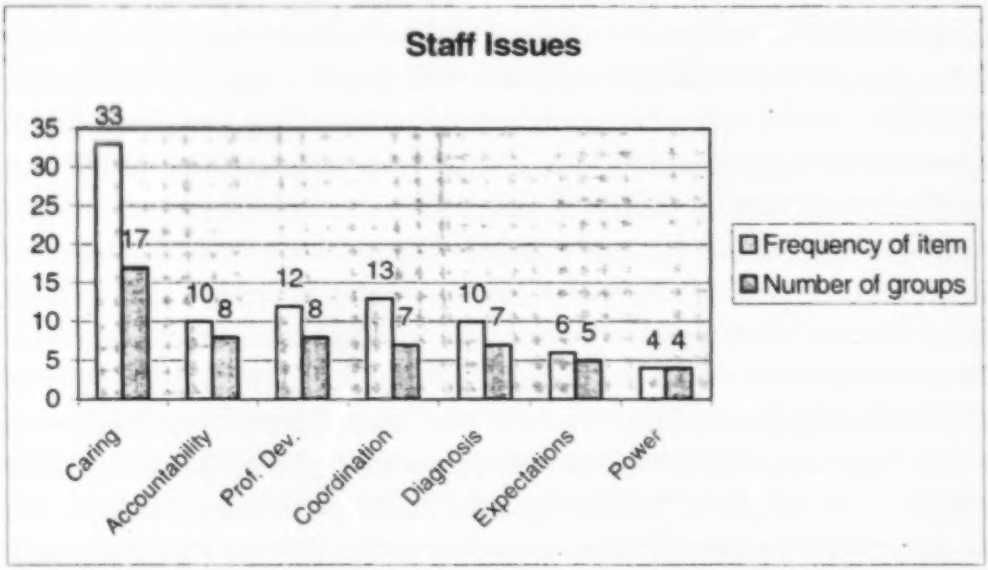
**Staff Issues**

The third most frequent category of commentary involved staff. The most powerful sub-theme in this category, mentioned by 17 focus groups, were comments about the importance of caring relationships between staff and students. The voices of at-risk students were especially poignant in relation to this sub-theme. Where there are caring relationships, students talked about teachers, "who understand us, where we're coming from, [they] cut us slack, but help us to help ourselves." Another student commented, "Teachers and administrators need to be more consistent, persistent and patient in dealing with students… especially those with challenges outside of school." Where a caring relationship has been established, several participants noted, teachers adopt a holistic approach and see themselves as teachers of students, not subjects and don't put an over-emphasis on control. A teacher-advisor program was described as working well in one Lethbridge school.




The quality of teaching was identified as a variable affecting early school leavers by eight focus groups. One principal called for Alberta Learning to consider some alternatives in accountability and measurable outcomes that will reflect the school as a whole. Students in custody talked about their experience of insufficient opportunity to provide input to their school staff where the staff think it is "their way or no way." These at-risk students perceived schools as close-minded and not realizing that kids do things for a reason and the smallest thing to a teacher can be the biggest thing to a student.

In eight focus groups there were calls, primarily by students and parents, for increased teacher training about Aboriginal people, for a greater emphasis on interpersonal/communications skills for teachers, and for improved diagnosis of students' learning styles and needs.

Seven groups spoke of the need for greater coordination among staff within a school where, "your student is my student." One participant stated, "…all teachers need to have knowledge of learning barriers – teamwork is important – [we] need to connect the academics and the people knowledge." Also noted in this sub-theme was the need for better coordination between school staff and inter-agency support staff.

Related to the need for greater coordination were observations about the need for better approaches to diagnosing students' learning barriers. Reflecting this need, one participant commented, "We need to be more creative in dealing with kids at-risk – more focus on pinpointing the assessment of the problem and then dealing with the kids." Another called for better screening for students with learning barriers, while several others called

for a whole new "constructive" model of special education, perhaps where funding should be based on treatment provided and results achieved.

The importance of staff expectations for students was raised in five focus groups, with two groups specifically urging that staff should hold high expectations for Aboriginal students. Overall, high expectations for students were seen as positive, but should also be balanced across academic and affective areas.

The last staff related sub-theme involves issues of staff power raised in four focus groups. One adult learner noted that frustration breeds confrontation, providing insight into why and how staff-student power struggles can emerge. One student noted the importance of teacher-student relationships being based on respect.

**Community-Family Supports**

The fourth most frequent category of commentary involved community, with three sub-themes receiving strong support. The most frequent sub-theme, raised in 13 focus groups, dealt with family and the importance of effective parental involvement with the school. On the negative side of this equation were observations, such as the student who commented, "There will always be school leavers because some families don't encourage high school completion." One participant commented, "The only students I know still in school are those whose parents are directly involved in the child's life." Another participant suggested there is a need for more awareness by parents on the importance of their role as the child's first teacher, noting the need for a greater emphasis in society on parenting skills and child-family support mechanisms.

Community partnerships were discussed by 12 focus groups with a call for stronger school-community relationships to meet students' needs. Reflecting this, one participant commented that "...students need a road map – involving parents and the community. The time is right to continue dialogue and develop action plans...we must be about meeting learner needs...."

A positive manifestation of community involvement was noted in 10 focus groups that talked about role models or mentor programs that can be provided to students through greater community involvement in schools. The participants who spoke about this issue expressed an awareness of the value of a one-on-one relationship for students with an adult role model as the student experiences school.

**Funding Issues**

The final category of commentary involved funding. Sixteen focus groups raised issues relating to general funding supports for a broad range of needs. The general implication was that removing barriers to high school completion will require increased resources, but that the additional resources are a good investment that saves public sector dollars in the long run.

There were also comments about funding supports for individual adult students and suggestions that funding support should not be based on input or process variables such as attendance, but on outcomes defined by student progress or success in overcoming barriers.

Nine groups raised the issue of the need for increased funding to reduce class size as a means to provide more individual attention to at-risk students. Lastly, one group noted the need for more funding to support finding and maintaining employer contacts in support of the Registered Apprenticeship Program.

## RESOURCE PANEL INPUT

The Coordinating Committee identified a small group of resource people who had extensive research or practical background in addressing the issue of early school leavers. These individuals were asked to comment on a discussion paper on early school leavers developed by the Committee. A list of the individuals who were kind enough to provide input and who agreed to be identified appears in Appendix D. Key insights from this group are summarized below.

Overall response from the resource panel to the Committee's discussion paper was one of concurrence with the key theme that early school leaving was a process, not an event, characterized by multiple and dynamic causal factors. Other points of concurrence were that often, early school leavers demonstrated distinctive patterns of dysfunction early in their school lives. The picture of the early school leaver as feeling powerless and unaware of their learning strengths and weaknesses was upheld. The perspective of many of the focus group participants of the traditional curriculum not meeting the needs of at-risk students and the need for more flexible and relevant programs with smoother high school-post secondary linkages was also noted by the resource panel members (Fisk, 1994).

One member, who works extensively with Aboriginal students, noted "there are many reasons why Aboriginal students leave school, and there is not one 'silver bullet' that will put it to rest, thus a multi-leveled and faceted approach will be needed." This member also argued there needs to be "more student supports like advising, career development, community service opportunities and work placement," and suggested that more Aboriginal instructors need to be available to teach Aboriginal curriculum and to create a positive Aboriginal presence within each school. Doctoral research recently completed by a First Nation member (Makokis, 2000) investigated why many First Nations students leave school early. This study reinforces the picture, from an insiders perspective, of the complex causation of early school leaving, and presents a rich description of the interplay between historical, cultural and interpersonal factors that militate against Aboriginal students staying in school. This study calls clearly for systemic change premised on positive relationships based on trust to counteract the alienation Aboriginal student's experience.

The large urban school jurisdictions in Alberta are focusing extensively on improving the achievement of Aboriginal students. Several Aboriginal staff employed by Edmonton Public provided input, again confirming the multiple causes of early school leaving and emphasizing the importance of awareness of Aboriginal culture by students and staff. One employee commented, "I believe that many early school leavers drop out mentally in the earlier grades, and physically drop out when they are sixteen." They pointed to the importance of developing culturally relevant curriculum, such as the *Aboriginal Studies 10, 20 and 30* program currently being piloted in Alberta. Other suggested supports included stronger involvement of the Aboriginal community and families in education, and more Aboriginal staff in schools. Recommended student centered supports included: better linkages to work experience and mentoring programs, more scholarships, grants and awards, expanded access to sports and recreation programs, and improved grade 9 orientation to high school with a stronger emphasis on career planning.

Other panel members thought the discussion paper missed the mark in some respects. One individual believed strongly that the discussion paper did not sufficiently address the causal factors that are based in the family of origin and argued for more emphasis on school-based programs focused on minimizing teen pregnancies and that teach parenting skills. There were also calls for more family supports to link school and home through programs like "Healthy Families"; for stronger head start programs for at-risk students; for full-day Early Childhood Services (kindergarten) programs for at-risk students; and for more family literacy programs. The overall focus of these enhanced initiatives would be to ensure that children begin grade one fully ready to succeed.

Still other panel members argued for a much stronger commitment by the learning system to be more learner focused and to accurately track early school leavers in a much more coordinated and consistent manner. Also presented were suggestions to not over-stress on-time high school completion at the risk of under-investing in

mature early school leavers who are not ready to resume their formal education until later in life, when the "healing period" mentioned in the focus groups is over.

Two members of the Barriers to High School Completion Coordinating Committee met with six representatives from the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) on September 22, 2000. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the commonality between Alberta Learning's *Barriers to High School Completion* project and EPSB's work in the area of preventing early school leaving.

Agreement was established early in the dialogue that traditional solutions have tended to treat early school leavers as victims and that the term "early school leaver" was preferable over the term "dropout" in order to avoid the negative, victim-oriented connotation of the latter. Also, notable was consensus that solutions to early school leaving will require a redefinition of the issue and will involve comprehensive, systemic solutions. EPSB's research on this issue confirmed several assumptions: that many early school leavers reach a crisis stage during grade 8-9; that transiency tends to be higher in this group; and that patterns of high needs linked to multiple causes are common. It was noted that a diploma is not necessary for completion and that this observation fits the Barriers Committee definition of completion. Tracking issues were also discussed and it was observed that controlling for in/out migration at the jurisdiction level was a challenge, making a universal tracking system imperative. There was consensus that models of cooperative education and program flexibility for students should be high priorities in the solution set for removing barriers. Centre High's close connection to the Continuing Education program was noted as an excellent example of program continuity. Some caution was voiced about how student success is defined in relationship to credits acquired, so as not to unwittingly constrain student choice and flexibility.

## THE STRATEGIC PLAN – REMOVING BARRIERS

***Where we are now:*** Presently, high school completion, defined as students completing high school within six years of entering grade 9, is hovering around 70%. As the data on page seven of this document demonstrates, longer-term high school completion rises to around 80% for 24 year olds and 81% for 29 year olds. Current programs that are seen to be effective in supporting students at risk of leaving school early include Outreach Programs and vocational programming such as RAP and Green Certificate that build on the student's abilities, aptitudes and career interests. Post-secondary programs for adult learners also contribute substantially to assisting students to acquire high school level competencies.

Programs designed to give students a strong sense of belonging and that establish caring staff-student relationships were often described as effective. Early intervention programs such as the Early Literacy Initiative, designed to build readiness skills early in the student's school experience, are seen as promising, but there were calls for greater coordination and even earlier interventions than are currently occurring. We do not presently have a systemic provincial plan to define a comprehensive and articulated approach to removing barriers to high school completion.

***Where we want to be:*** Alberta is presently experiencing strong economic growth and high employment rates. Early school leaver rates typically climb in such circumstances. However, given the increasing importance of formal education for employment success in an information economy, short-term targets of 75% and 85% for completion within 6 years of entering grade 9 and longer term high school completion are realistic. In the long term, however, Alberta can only be satisfied when "...every youth will complete high school with certification that is commensurate with abilities and interests," (Conference Board of Canada, 2000 p.11) and that lead to successful career paths. These targets will only be achievable, however, if a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to removing barriers to high school completion is created and implemented. One focus group described the process of building such a plan as requiring profound change where, instead of making the student fit the high school, we ensure the high school fits the student. Such thinking supports the argument that systemic changes will be necessary to achieve universal high school completion rates.

***How we will get there:*** The key outcomes identified in this report, considered as a whole, point the way to substantive, systemic change. Some of the outcomes are low cost while others may require substantial resource support. Although the input to the *Barriers to High School Completion* project was broadly based, formal stakeholder reaction to this report will be required to gauge the level of professional and public support for the suggested outcomes detailed in the next section.

Relative to implementation considerations, many of the suggested outcomes are written with the intent that they can be incorporated in the Ministry of Learning three-year plan and/or in school jurisdiction or post-secondary institutions three-year education or business plans. By identifying key outcomes, the intent is to provide maximum flexibility and support for school based solutions and strategies. Hence the Ministry's accountability framework may serve as a major implementation vehicle for this strategic plan for removing barriers to high school completion.

Many of the suggested outcomes in this strategic plan must be addressed at the jurisdiction level, and some require close collaboration between Alberta Learning and school jurisdictions and post-secondary institutions.

Twenty-one suggested outcomes were derived from the literature review, focus group analysis and the input from the resource panel. The 21 outcomes were then organized in relationship to key themes that served to logically organize the outcomes, which are presented in the next section of this report. The key organizing themes are:

1. Early childhood development supports
2. Listening to and supporting students
3. Managing student alienation
4. Success for aboriginal students
5. Students knowledge of self and effects of labeling
6. Program flexibility
7. Cooperative education
8. Tracking students
9. Best practices

## KEY THEMES AND RELATED SUGGESTED OUTCOMES

The above nine themes provide the framework for organizing the suggested outcomes. The themes are further fleshed out and supported with related text from the report in this section. Examples of activities underway or suggested activities are identified to facilitate development of specific strategies to achieve the desired outcome.

1. **Early Childhood Development Supports** – Consistent attention was focused on the importance of enhancing early childhood development supports by focus groups, the resource panel and by the literature. There appears to be a growing appreciation that the early environment children grow up in powerfully shapes their future opportunities for success in school. In many cases parents, as the child's primary advocate, need additional supports to optimize their children's potential. Alberta has, in the past few years, heeded this growing perception by allocating increasing resources to early childhood development, and yet a comprehensive, articulated strategy for using these resources is largely dependent on the right set of variables or events at the local level. The following are three suggested outcomes are intended to address this theme.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • Many observations were of students struggling with inter-generation patterns of low education success, or low family income levels negatively affecting students' chances for success.<br><br>• …there is a need for more awareness by parents on the importance of their role as the child's first teacher, noting the need for a greater emphasis in society on parenting skills and child-family support mechanisms.<br><br>• "The only students I know still in school are those whose parents are directly involved in the child's life."<br><br>• An example of a promising support program is the Healthy Families initiative funded by the Edmonton Community Foundation. | **a. Community agencies with mandates that include family supports work closely with school jurisdictions to promote and facilitate positive parenting that provides stimulating and nurturing home environments.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Collaborative work between jurisdictions and community agencies to provide parent supports.*<br>• *Community Family Literacy Program, Parent/Child Literacy Strategy, Aboriginal Head start, Program Enhancement Projects.*<br>• *ACYI initiatives (eg., Student Health, Pre-conception to Six) that build school/home/community relationships.* |
| • Community partnerships were discussed by 12 focus groups who called for stronger school – community relationships to meet students needs. Reflecting this, one participant commented, "…students need a road map – involving parents and the community. The time is right to continue dialogue and develop action plans… We must be about meeting learner needs…." | **b. The education planning and reporting process leads to optimum community supports through partnerships with other government agencies and community supports.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Programs such as Early Literacy Initiative, Enhanced Opportunity Projects and Program Unit Funding.*<br>• *Alberta Learning collaborates with jurisdictions to develop outcome measures to assess readiness skills of grade one students.* |
| • There was considerable interest in parent supports to link school and home. Through initiatives like stronger head start programs for at-risk students, full-day Early Childhood Services (kindergarten) programs for at-risk students, and more family literacy programs, children can begin grade one fully ready to succeed. | **c. There is a better understanding of the learning achievements needed by grade one students to promote success, and programs are adjusted to better develop these skills in pre-school children.**<br><br>**Examples of suggested activities:**<br>• *Alberta Learning and school jurisdictions collaborate to gather Effective Strategies that enhance the development of entry level skills needed to be successful in grade 1.* |

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2. **Listening to and Supporting Students** – Students at risk of leaving school early tend to be the most disenfranchised students in the schools while coping with complex problems in their lives. Students' frustration with their lack of success can easily lead to confrontational relationships and power struggles with teachers and peers. The following three suggested outcomes are intended to ensure students' voices are heard and that they receive the support they need to establish and maintain positive relationships.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • Other student affect issues included… the need to provide for more student involvement and decision making in their school lives. | **a. Through greater involvement in school-based decision-making, students have an increased sense of belonging and commitment to school life.**<br><br>**Examples of suggested activities:**<br>• *Alberta Learning consult with education partners to review the School Councils regulation to include junior high school student involvement in school councils.*<br>• *Discuss the suggested outcome with Alberta Home and School Council Association as a possible link with the Minister's Forum on School Councils follow-up.* |
| • More personal approaches to interacting with students were suggested as a way of making schools less alienating to students.<br><br>• A positive manifestation of community involvement was noted in 10 focus groups that talked about role models or mentor programs that can be provided to students through greater community involvement in schools. The participants who spoke about this issue expressed an awareness of the value of a one-on-one relationship for students with an adult role model as the student experiences school.<br><br>• Five groups spoke about affective supports for students, including keeping students focused through athletics, building support networks in schools, emphasizing friendliness, and recognition and reward programs for student successes. | **b. There are greater opportunities to support students in overcoming barriers to success through extra-curricular activities, mentoring programs, and recognition of students' successes.**<br><br>**Examples of suggested activities:**<br>• *Continue and enhance recognition of students' successes in extra-curricular activities and mentoring programs.*<br>• *Share the recognition ideas with organizations and authorities.*<br>• *Encourage student volunteerism in the community.* |

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| | |
|---|---|
| • At-risk students were also described as often being involved in power struggles with other students as a means to improve their status and self-esteem. Consequently peer relationships among early school leavers are frequently negative. Instead of providing peer support networks among early school leavers, cliques and group conflict sometimes emerges. A better model of peer relating with more supports for peer relationships was called for.<br><br>• Closely related to the sub-theme of student affect was the sub-theme of students' use of illegal drugs or alcohol. Ten focus groups raised this issue raising a relatively common concern that drugs or alcohol seem to be easier to get at an earlier age.<br><br>• When students are experiencing multiple problems such as poverty, family dysfunction, pregnancy, health issues, etc. the need for coordinated and multiple supports was noted by nine focus groups. | **c. School programs and curriculum provide greater and more consistent opportunities for students to identify issues and develop skills in managing peer conflict, anger management, family conflict, parenting skills, health, human sexuality, and drug abuse awareness.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Alberta Learning provides in-servicing for school authorities' staff to assist in the implementation of the new K-9 Health and Life Skills curriculum.* |

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3. **Managing Student Alienation** – Students at risk of leaving school early are highly alienated. Comments from students like, "Students are shadows of learning disabilities" or "Learning barriers have to heal… students have to go through stages [of healing]" speak to the depth of emotion at-risk students experience as they attempt to cope with schooling. Schools as organizations can displace the primary goal of being there for students. The *Safe and Caring Schools* initiative is providing important programming support to help address this area of student need. However, routine assessment of students' affective experience of school would help to ensure that schools respond appropriately to the emotional needs of students.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • Nineteen focus groups reflecting 57 comments or observations dealt with the sub-theme of students' affective experience of school. One participant noted that students drop out incrementally, course by course. More personal approaches to interacting with students were suggested as a way of making schools less alienating to students. | **a. All students feel cared for and safe.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Maintain and enhance the provision of a safe and caring school environment through the Effective Behavioural Support program (phase 2 of the Safe and Caring Schools Initiative).*<br>• *Outreach programs which cater to the needs of expectant and new mothers provide programming to assist the students with life issues.* |
| • Where a caring relationship has been established, several participants noted teachers adopt a holistic approach and see themselves as teachers of students, not subjects and don't put an over-emphasis on control. A teacher-advisor program was described as working well in one Lethbridge school.<br><br>• The most powerful sub-theme in this category, mentioned by 17 focus groups were comments on the importance of caring relationships between staff and students. In eight focus groups there were calls, primarily by students and parents, for increased teacher training about Aboriginal people and for a greater emphasis on interpersonal or communications skills for teachers. | **b. School staff and community actively promote a safe and caring school culture for students.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) projects that address safe and caring strategies for alienation, power struggles, behaviour and attitudes.* |

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4. **Success for Aboriginal Students** – Cross-cultural awareness and respecting Aboriginal cultures were major themes in the focus group discussions and resource panel input. Bridging cultural differences and defining enlightened policy approaches in support of Aboriginal learners will continue to be a priority for the Department of Learning.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • The Aboriginal population has historically experienced higher early school leaving rates compared to the general population. Stats Can data (Galt, 2000) indicate that the percentage of early school leavers in the Aboriginal population remains unacceptably high. In 1996, 45% of Canadian Aboriginal people aged 20-29 had not completed high school.<br><br>• Program relevance was a sub-theme identified in 9 focus groups that spoke of the need to adapt the curriculum to the learning styles, history and culture of Aboriginal people and the value of ensuring that teaching methods match students interests and learning styles.<br><br>• Specific suggestions were made for supports for student involvement in extra-curricular activities, for more Aboriginal counselors and instructors, and for integrated support systems based on improved coordination of inter-agency services.<br><br>• An Aboriginal participant stated that psychological assessment tools need to be changed as they are not geared toward Native culture. | **a. Outcomes from the *Removing Barriers to High School Completion – Final Report* complement and support outcomes for increasing successful high school completion by Aboriginal students that emerge from *First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework Report* and *Strengthening Relationships, the Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy Framework.***<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Native Education Projects, Amiskwaciy School and Aboriginal Studies 10-20-30 Curriculum.*<br><br>**Examples of suggested activities:**<br>• *Align outcomes identified in this report with those in the First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education Policy Framework Report and in Strengthening Relationships, the Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy Framework.* |

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5. **Students' Knowledge of Self and Effects of Labeling** – Adult students who had left school but returned to formal education later in their lives spoke compellingly about their previous experience of schooling. They spoke about not knowing or understanding their levels of achievement or why they struggled with their schooling, not understanding how to compensate positively for weaknesses and build on their strengths. Adult and younger students also spoke of the devastating effects of being labeled and how this effect damaged their self-confidence. The next set of suggested outcomes addresses these issues.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • Eight focus groups spoke of students not acquiring foundational academic skills because too often students are given "social passes" when they had not learned the curriculum for their grade level. Related to this concern was the perceived need for better parent and student self-knowledge of curricular achievement. | **a. Students and their parents have clear knowledge and understanding of the student's curricular achievement, ideal learning styles, and the student's affective experience of school**<br><br>**Examples of suggested activities:**<br>• *Consider the inclusion of portfolio development as early as grade 7 in the review of the CALM curriculum.* |
| • There were many observations of the need for better approaches to diagnosing students' learning barriers. Reflecting this need, one participant commented, "We need to be more creative in dealing with kids at-risk – more focus on pinpointing the assessment of the problem and then dealing with the kids." Another called for better screening for students with learning barriers, while several others called for a whole new models of special education, perhaps where funding should be based on treatment provided and results achieved.<br><br>• Seven groups also discussed the negative impact that labeling has on students. One participant expressed dissatisfaction with counseling and the perception of labeling and streaming for lower achieving students, suggesting that greater communication is needed. | **b. New approaches to special education are in place that de-emphasize labels and emphasize diagnosis, counseling and program solutions to students' learning challenges.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Implementation of the Special Education Review includes recommendation on new approaches to funding and supporting students with special needs.* |

| | |
|---|---|
| • In eight focus groups there were calls, primarily by students and parents, for increased teacher training about Aboriginal people, for a greater emphasis on interpersonal/communications skills for teachers, and for improved diagnosis of students' learning styles and needs.<br><br>• The importance of staff expectations for students was raised in five focus groups, with two groups specifically urging that staff should hold high expectations for Aboriginal students. | **c. Teachers have the necessary understandings of diagnostic results, teamwork skills, and cross-cultural sensitivities to meet the learning needs of at-risk students.**<br><br>**Examples of suggested activities:**<br>• *Alberta Learning and education partners review the Teaching Quality Standard to determine the extent to which its competencies are included in pre and in-service opportunities.* |
| • The quality of teaching was identified as a variable affecting early school leavers by eight focus groups.<br><br>• "…all teachers need to have knowledge of learning barriers – teamwork is important – [we] need to connect the academics and the people knowledge." | **d. Teachers are provided with opportunities to improve their knowledge and understanding of their students' levels of achievement and learning styles, and incorporate these in their teaching methods and teamwork strategies.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Alberta Learning continues to support regional consortia, and work on the Efficacy Study to be piloted in 2001/2002 and in 2002/2003 for those teachers applying for permanent certification.* |

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6. **Program Flexibility** - Program flexibility was a major issue in the focus group discussions. One group captured this succinctly when they commented, "Its time to…make high school fit the student, not the student fit the high school." Seamless learning will require post-secondary institutions collaborating with high schools to offer alternative delivery methods, occupational training opportunities, just-in-time remedial instruction and other supports to at-risk students.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • Seven groups talked about the sub-theme of students' age; asking, how do we keep kids in school who may not be quite finished at 20. The suggestion was made that we need to change the picture of school to a life long approach providing both more formalized and supported exit and re-entry points in the secondary education system. | **a. Successfully support more Albertans in completing high school.**<br><br>**Examples of suggested activities:**<br>• *Alberta Learning continue its emphasis to life-long learning which recognizes that high school completion provides a solid foundation for continuous learning.* |
| • Program was the dominant category of commentary in the focus group discussions. The most frequent sub-theme raised in 20 focus groups were calls for improved program flexibility for students.<br><br>• The traditional high school curriculum was often seen as being too focused on university preparation. Consequently, career preparation in the trades was not seen as being sufficiently tailored to students learning styles, learning strengths or optimal career options. | **b. Through greater choice, students have more relevant program options that better meet their needs.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Jurisdictions provide more choice through alternative programs and flexible programming (eg., outreach, home schooling, Tech Prep, Work Experience, RAP, IOP, and CTS).* |
| • High school programs for adults should not be seen as merely a safety net for early leavers, but an integral part of the strategy to address barriers to student success. This suggests a much higher level of collaboration between high schools and post-secondary providers of basic education programs for adults. | **c. Through a more seamless education system, adult students complete programs and receive a departmentally issued credential.**<br><br>**Examples of activities underway:**<br>• *Common Credentials Project as part of Adult Skills Alberta.* |

7. **Cooperative Education** – The common perception that the basic education system is biased in favor of academically-oriented students received considerable validation in this project. Eighty-two percent of the focus groups raised cooperative education and the need to make schooling more relevant for trades-oriented students by improving the linkages between school and work.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • Program transitions from junior high to high school and from high school to post-secondary study were suggested by 15 focus groups as deserving attention. Grade 9 was described as a crunch point for many students with too few program options being available, especially for the vocationally-oriented students. | **a. Grade 9 curriculum includes an orientation towards the trades and other occupations.**<br><br>**Examples of suggested activity:**<br>• *Broad consultation with education partners on the orientation of the grade 9 curriculum.* |
| • "Schools should be more flexible and student focused."<br><br>• Career and Technology Studies and Registered Apprenticeship Programs were widely supported, but there were compelling calls for extending these efforts through better articulation with technical institutes and with the work place while at the same time linking more fundamentally with the individual student's abilities, interests and needs. | **b. Students' school life and work life are more closely linked.**<br><br>**Examples of activity underway:**<br>• *Registered Apprenticeship Program, Work Experience Program, Career and Technology Studies.* |
| • The perspective strongly represented in four focus groups is that IOP is too often a "dumping ground" for students with learning disabilities. One participant commented that IOP results in "…students getting lost in the middle – on the one hand they can't go on to post-secondary, yet they can't really go into the trades route." There were also concerns about labeling students with low expectations once placed in IOP.<br><br>• This recommended strategy is also aligned with recommendations of the *Final Report of the Common Credentials Project.* It suggests a critical point of intersection of the goals for close collaboration between high schools, business and industry, post-secondary institutions and Adult Skills Alberta for a seamless education system. | **c. Integrated Occupational Program students complete a high school diploma with greater opportunities to pursue career interests.**<br><br>**Examples of activity underway:**<br>• *Redesign of the IOP curriculum and better links to CTS courses for IOP students.* |

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8. **Tracking Students** – Concomitant with increasing program flexibility for students is the need to improve the education system's ability to track students. An improved "ECS- grade 16" tracking system that follows students into post-secondary studies will provide the ability to confirm what program supports are working and where resources might be better allocated over time.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • The remaining student sub-themes involved calls for better student tracking systems by five focus groups….<br><br>• Still other resource people argued for a much stronger commitment by the learning system to accurately track early school leavers in a much more coordinated and consistent manner. | a. **Alberta Learning more accurately tracks early school leaving, program choices and levels of success.**<br><br>**Example of activity underway:**<br>• *Development of single student identifier is underway.* |

9. **Best Practices** – Focus group participants talked fairly consistently about the need to invest wisely in education. Program spending that helps students complete high school may reduce future demands on social support programs by building on best practices today.

| Issues or Observations | Suggested Outcomes |
|---|---|
| • Sixteen focus groups raised issues relating to general funding supports for a broad range of needs. The general implication here was that removing barriers to high school completion will require increased resources, but that the additional resources are a good investment that saves public sector dollars in the long run. | a. **The resource issues related to the implementation of the removing *Barriers to High School Completion - Final Report* are addressed in collaboration with our education partners**<br><br>**Example of activity underway:**<br>• *Alberta Learning collaborates with education partners to identify stay-in-school strategies that need to be supported, enhanced and strengthened.* |

**How We Will Know We Have Arrived** – The above suggested outcomes comprise a significant realignment of roles, responsibilities and student supports in the basic/adult education system. Realization of all of the recommended outcomes will represent profound and systemic change. Implementation will require time; therefore, an incremental increase in expected results is suggested. Key outcome measures of high school completion reported in Alberta Learning's Annual Results Report will tell us whether the above outcomes for removing barriers to high school completion are successful. The key measures will be the achievement of high school completion rates by 19 year olds of 75% and longer-term completion by 24 year olds of 85% by 2005. Over the longer term, completion rates should start to reflect the benefits of early intervention strategies and targets of 90% and 95% respectively by 2015 are recommended. Although such targets are ambitious, Albertans should expect no less in an information age characterized by global competition.

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## APPENDIX A - POTENTIAL ATTITUDE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

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## APPENDIX B – FOCUS GROUP LOCATIONS AND CATEGORIES OF PARTICIPANTS

| Focus Group Sponsor | Participants |
|---|---|
| Aboriginal Youth and Family Well-Being and Education Society | Program Directors, Teacher, Counselor, returning students |
| Aboriginal Youth Peer Support Group | Former Aboriginal drop outs |
| Boyle Street Education Centre – Charter School for Children at Risk | Counselor, administrator, teachers, youth worker |
| Calgary Catholic School District | Administrators, counselor, teachers, parents, student |
| Calgary Public School District | Administrators, counselor, post-secondary administrator |
| Conseil Scolaire du Centre-Nord No. | Parents, teachers, school trustees, administrator, student |
| Edmonton Catholic School District (St. Joe's High School) | Student, parent, counselor, Native parent/counselor |
| Edmonton Public School District (2 focus groups) | Student, principals, counselors, |
| Edmonton South Young Offenders Probation Office | Youth on probation in the community, |
| Edmonton South Young Offenders Probation Office | Parents of youth on probation in the community, or in custody |
| Edmonton Young Offenders Centre | Youth in Custody |
| Fort McMurray School Division | Teachers, students, private sector |
| Gift Lake | Notes of meeting between students and superintendent. |
| High Prairie School Division (Kinuso) | Students, Community Learner Facilitator, Members of the Native Community, principal and teachers. |
| Holy Family Catholic Regional Division | Students, teachers, parents |
| Lethbridge School Division | Administrators, counselor, teachers and students |
| NorQuest College | Adult Learners, college staff |
| Northern Lights School Division | Parents, teachers, central office administrators, community members |
| Northland School Division Board | Trustees, central office administration |
| Portage College | Adult Learners, college staff |
| Prairie Rose School Division | Administrators and counselors |
| Wild Rose School Division | Administrators |

## Appendix C – Focus Group Coding Framework

- Stds (students)
  - Age (items related to students age)
  - Self (self-knowledge)
  - Affect (items related to students feelings or affect)
  - Label (special education labelling)
  - Work (work loads)
  - Career (career path awareness)
  - Track (tracking system)
  - Drugs or alcohol (use of or access to)
  - Sups (direct supports for students)

- Staff
  - Caring (or the lack thereof)
  - Coord (coordination among)
  - pd (professional development needs)
  - Expct (expectations for student success or failure)
  - Power (power struggles with students)
  - Acct (accountability, teacher evaluation)
  - Diag (diagnosis of students learning styles, at-riskness, etc.)

- Prog (Program)
  - Early (early intervention)
  - Flex (flexible programming including choice, individualization or continuous progress)
  - Coop (co-operative education programs with a heavy emphasis on career paths)
  - Outrch (comments on the outreach program)
  - Calm (comments on CALM program)
  - Multi (programming based on concepts of multiple intelligences)
  - Times (need for flexibility in the times available to students to access programs)
  - Trans (junior-senior high transition issues)
  - Plar (prior learning and achievement recognition)
  - Iop (comments on the IOP program)
  - Rel (relevance)
  - Rap (comments on RAP and or Tech Prep programs)

- Funds
  - Class (comments on class size)
  - Sups (funding needed for student supports)
  - Rap (funding levels for the RAP program)

- Com (community)
  - Fam (family issues)
  - Mentr (mentoring and role models)
  - Skep (skepticism that Alberta Learning can effect improvement to the ESL rate)
  - Part (partnerships; e.g. with respect to student attendance)

## APPENDIX D – RESOURCE PANEL PARTICIPANTS

1. Benjamin Levin – author of "Dealing with Dropouts in Canadian Education."
2. Bob Fisk – author of "Urban School Dropouts: A Case Study."
3. Doug McNally – CEO, Edmonton Community Foundation.
4. Graham Lowe and Harvey Krahn – have completed extensive research on school to work transitions in Alberta.
5. Lewis Cardinal, Director and Coordinator, Office of Native Student Services, University of Alberta.
6. Steve Ramsanker – Safe and Caring schools special project – Alberta Learning.
7. Terry Fortin, Project Leader, Native Education Project, Alberta Learning.
8. Edmonton Public Schools Panel
    - Karen Bardy
    - Gloria Chalmers
    - Anne Mulgrew
    - Carol Suddards
    - Simon van der Valk
    - Linda Wiens
9. Edmonton Public Schools' Aboriginal Education Staff
    - Donna Leask
    - Edith Dalla Costa
    - Rosalie Cardinal
    - Pauline L'Hirondelle
    - Marion Stone

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